

# Dowry a curse

Sociology



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In spite of modernization and the increasing role of women in all walks of life, the practice of the dowry in India is becoming widespread, and the value of dowry is increasing. Now the dowry has become a great criterion in the marriages instead of a proper bride. If a bride's family fails to pay the amount of dowry demanded by the prospective groom's family, the bride will be cruelly treated by the in-laws, and in many cases will be burnt to death.

"No dowry, no marriage," is a widespread fear in present day society. There has also been an emergence of a feudal mindset with a materialistic attitude in a new globalized economy. The price tag for the groom is now bigger and bolder. The emergence of an affluent middle class, the torchbearer of social change in modern India, is the main factor for the perpetuation of the dowry system.

Dowry is derived from the ancient Hindu customs of "kanyadan" and "stridhan". In "kanyadan", the father of the bride offers the father of the groom money or property, etc. whereas for "stridhan", the bride herself gets jewelry and clothes at the time of her marriage, usually from her relatives or friends. In "varadakshina", the father of the bride presents the groom cash or kind. All of these could be done voluntarily and out of affection and love. Payment of a dowry, gift—often financial, has a long history in many parts of the world. In India, the payments of a dowry was prohibited in 1961 under Indian civil law and subsequently by Sections 304B and 498a of the Indian Penal Code were enacted to make it easier for the wife to seek redress from potential harassment by the husband's family. Dowry laws have come under criticism as they have been misused by women and their families.

It has become politically fashionable to attribute all forms of violence and discrimination against women, including female infanticide and female foeticide to the economic burden of dowry that a daughter is said to represent.

Dowry requirements are used as another excuse for considering daughters a burden. The anti-dowry movement, by limiting itself to the constant repetition of 'dowry abolition' as a panacea for women's empowerment and as the primary strategy for ending their oppression, has only helped give further legitimacy to the conventional belief that daughters are an economic liability.

We need to combat the culture of disinheritance if we wish to effectively combat the growing hold of dowry culture.

There is little mention of exorbitant dowries causing the ruin of families in the literature of pre-British India. Ruin due to exorbitant dowry payments became a major theme in nineteenth century literature because this period witnessed an unprecedented erosion of women's economic importance and inheritance rights due to the manner in which the colonial rulers carried out land settlement operations in India.

In conformity with Victorian norms that they were familiar with in their home country, land entitlements were given to 'male heads of the family', bypassing our customary laws that allowed various categories of entitlements to women. This concentrated property in the hands of men in an unprecedented way and paved the way for the disinheritance of women. In addition, the rapacious land revenue demands drained large amounts of

the economic surplus from the rural economy. It made the peasants extremely cash poor.

However, with rural society and artisan groups becoming extremely cash poor, the tradition of 'stridhan' seems to have become burdensome. The traditional view of daughters as 'paraya dhan' got a new and deadlier meaning. The term 'paraya dhan' had the connotation of viewing women as wealth. This is an apt description in a society in which women carried their 'stridhan' with them, that is, property that is theirs by right. Traditionally, the entry of a bride into her new family would be referred to as the coming of Lakshmi (Lakshmi aayi hai). Even today vestiges of that tradition remain in most communities. A young bride enters her marital home with haldi (turmeric) soaked feet, leaving auspicious marks on the floor, marks associated with Lakshmi, goddess of wealth.

Thus, our modern inheritance laws have increasingly moved in favour of men and against the interests of women. All those communities that practiced matrilineal inheritance, such as the Nairs in Kerala, have also been forced through legislation to move towards patrilineal inheritance. Systems that provided reasonable or adequate protection of women's economic rights have been steamrollered out of existence.

This can only be accomplished through a fundamental shift in Indian social attitudes about both marriage and women. Perceptions about appropriate roles for women must evolve to include education and employment, the current requirement that brides surrender all future assets to in-laws must be changed so that parents can depend on daughters as well as sons in their old age, and finally, the government must undertake sustained action to

prevent employment and wage discrimination against women in the labor market.

Unfortunately, there was an enormous period of lag time between the time when calls for social change are actually made and the time when societal beliefs and customs actually began to transform. Today, dowry continues to be a socially accepted and rational outcome of the current Indian marriage market. True progress in the elimination of the dowry system will only come through endeavors to create awareness among Indian communities about the negative effects of dowry, through programs and government sanctions that endorse education and employment for women of all ages, and through a fundamental change in the attitudes of Indian peoples.

The laws enacted to eradicate the evil system of dowry from the society should be supported and backed by the public opinion. If progressive legislations lacks the support of public opinion it is no more than a waste bundle of papers and are regarded as dead law; as is case with the Indian Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, it must be asserted that a social reform should be done in consonance with social thinking, behaviour and after creation of a strong public opinion, as laws could only be effective when they are backed by major section of the society. Moreover, law can only catalyze change in social behaviour, but the real change in society can be brought through the creation of new values and aspirations and willingness of the people to change their centuries old attitude.

The massive task of social engineering cannot be achieved as long as the centuries old attitude and thinking remains deep rooted in the prevailing society. Apart, from this public awareness through education, media and <https://assignbuster.com/dowry-a-curse/>

through other means should be created; political will and commitment combined with efficient administrative support are needed to tackle the problem of dowry. Social legislations must be backed by the social awareness and must match the letter and spirit of law. As it is rightly said by Pluto, No law or ordinance is mightier than understanding.